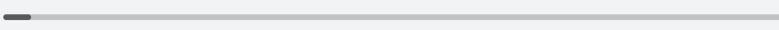


How They See Us

▶ 0:00 / 54:45   

Stereotypes are all around us, shaping how we see the world – and how the world sees us. On the surface, the stereotypes that other people hold shouldn't affect the way we think or act. But our concerns about other people's perceptions have a way of burrowing deep into our minds. This week, social psychologist Claude Steele explains the psychology of "stereotype threat."

Additional Resources

Steele, C.M. *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*, 2021.

Steele, C. M. Thin ice: "Stereotype threat" and black college students. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 284(2), 44-47, 50-54, 1999, August.

Steele, Claude M., Aronson, Joshua. "Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans.." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69(5): 797-811, 1995.

Steele, C. M. *A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance*. *American Psychologist*, 52(6), 613–629, 1997.

Spencer, S. J., Steele, C. M., & Quinn, D. M. Stereotype threat and women's math performance. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 35, 4-28, 1999.

Steele CM, Spencer SJ, Aronson J. Contending with group image: the psychology of stereotype and social identity threat. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. 34. pp. 379–440, 2002.

Transcript ▼

The transcript below may be for an earlier version of this episode. Our transcripts are provided by various partners and may contain errors or deviate slightly from the audio.

Shankar Vedantam: This is Hidden Brain. I'm Shankar Vedantam. Have you ever walked into a school or workplace and found yourself wondering what the people there think of you? Are they judging you because you're a woman?

Female Voice: Why are they staring at me?

Shankar Vedantam: Or gay? Or an immigrant?

Male (Accented english): I wonder if they'll think I have an accent when I speak.

Shankar Vedantam: Because you have a disability? Because you're poor?

Male Voice: Is it because I'm old?

Shankar Vedantam: Has this affected what you say, whether you speak, and how you act?

Female Voice: I hope they don't think I'm boring.

Male Voice: Is there something in my teeth?

Female Voice: Maybe if I just sit over here and I don't say anything, maybe they won't notice me.

Shankar Vedantam: On the surface it would seem like the impressions other people have of us

live only inside their minds. It shouldn't affect the way we think or feel, or act. But our concerns about other people's perceptions have a way of burrowing deep into our minds.

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Male Voice: Do I even belong here?

Shankar Vedantam: This week on Hidden Brain, how our worries about the stereotypes people hold of us can shape everything from parent/teacher conferences to police shootings.

Shankar Vedantam: We all have memories of summers gone by, of long walks and lazy afternoons, relaxing by a pool, vacations with friends and family. Claude Steele has a less pleasant memory of one long ago summer. He was with a group of kids coming home from school. It was the 1950s, and they were in Phoenix, a small town just south of Chicago.

Claude Steele: You know, we were just walking along, each of us peeling off as we got closer to our houses.

Shankar Vedantam: Claude was six or seven years old.

Claude Steele: We were coming home on the last day of school. School's out.

Shankar Vedantam: The promise of a golden summer stretched out before them. Everyone was talking about how they would spend the coming months of vacation, boasting about their plans. And then one of the older kids said something that seared the moment into Claude's memory.

Claude Steele: We were talking about what we were going to do, just a sort of gang of kids coming home in the summer. Somebody says, "I'm going to go swimming." Somebody else says, "No, you can't go swimming in there. You can't go swimming in the Harvey Park Pool, unless you go on Wednesday afternoons. That's the only time 'we're' allowed there."

Shankar Vedantam: Claude didn't fully understand what the older kid meant, but he knew there was an important subtext to the statement, "That's the only time we're allowed there." This wasn't just another rule. The library closes at 4:00. The restaurant opens at 9:00. There was something about this particular rule that was freighted with meaning. The rule was about them, these particular boys. It wasn't that the pool was only open on Wednesday afternoons. There was something about these kids that meant that they could only use the pool on Wednesday afternoons. Claude listened intently, the way kids do when they realize they have just found a portal into the grownup world.

Claude Steele: It emerged from somebody else that, "No, we can't just go there any time. The only time Black people, the only time negro people—" I'm not even sure what term we used in those days, "We can only go on Wednesday afternoons." That was stunning to the group. I just think first, it was a little mild resistance, but somehow we knew that it was true. It was a fact. I remember just kind of quieting, at least I could be, constructing this memory. But, I have a sense of just being puzzled and kind of stopped, "What does that mean?"

Shankar Vedantam: What it meant was that on Wednesday afternoons kids from Phoenix, which was predominately Black, would troupe over to the neighboring village of Harvey, which was predominately white.

Claude Steele: There would be in Phoenix, leading out of Phoenix and going towards the Harvey Park Pool on Wednesday afternoons, a kind of long line of Black kids with their swimming trunks wrapped in a towel and going to swim in the swimming pool. You got used to it, but that made you aware that there was something about you, something about your group, that was different and that had some real significance. And... I just remember feeling kind of a quiet anger about it, a resentment.

Shankar Vedantam: A question was forming in Claude's mind, and it was a question that would come to animate the following decades of his life as he became a renowned psychologist, "What do these people think of us?" As the white residents of Harvey looked out their windows on Wednesday afternoons, what did they make of the line of Black children walking to the pool? What kind of attitudes did they have? Were they contemptuous? Empathetic? Indifferent? In time, Claude began to get answers to those questions. It wasn't like someone stopped and told him, "Here's what we think of you." It was communicated, like most everything else, through how people acted toward him, toward his family.

Claude Steele: There was a white school and a Black school. The Black schools usually had vastly different resources than the white school. You'd learn that the roller skating rink is only open to African Americans on Thursday nights. I remember that. You can buy clothes in the department stores, but you can't try them on. I remember my brother wanting to be on the baseball team, and the baseball coach telling [him] as they were loading themselves onto the bus in front of the YMCA building that no, he wasn't welcome. He couldn't play. He couldn't play on that team.

Shankar Vedantam: Soon, there were experiences involving odd jobs and work. Claude's parents made it clear they expected him and his brother to start earning money.

Claude Steele: We were not a family with a lot of resources, so it was clear. My parents also made this abundantly clear: Make money.

Shankar Vedantam: The boys had paper routes. They picked vegetables on a farm. They did lawn detail at the home of a doctor in Harvey. When they were teenagers, maybe 13 or so, Claude and his brother got a tip about work at a golf course.

Claude Steele: If you got there early, you got a good number. I remember that. The lower your number, the more likely you'd be called and the more work you'd get. So, we went there, I don't five, six o'clock in the morning.

Shankar Vedantam: Claude and his brother were pleased to see they were among the first to get to the golf course. They were pretty sure they would get caddy badges. They were excited.

Claude Steele: Kids came in all day and they were given badges.

Shankar Vedantam: Each time another kid was given a caddy badge, Claude and his brother thought, "Okay, it'll be our turn next."

Claude Steele: They kept overlooking us. And this went on all day. I mean, until late afternoon. Then after everybody else, I mean dozens and dozens of kids who'd been given caddy badges, one of the adults came out and looked at us and said, "You-" using the N word, "Are still here? We're not giving you a badge."

Shankar Vedantam: Claude and his brother felt humiliated. It was obvious what the people around the golf course thought of them.

Claude Steele: I do remember sort of slouching back to the train and getting on it, and taking it back home and talking to our parents about it. I have the sense it was a weekend night, and we talked about it.

Shankar Vedantam: The boys were crushed as they shared what had happened. Their parents listened attentively and tried to comfort them. What do you tell teenagers who have experienced naked prejudice? How do you explain what happened?

Claude Steele: When I think about it, I do think of the warmth of my parents and the support, the intelligence of my parents to kind of be real and explain this thing as best you could possibly explain it. It's an illness.

Shankar Vedantam: Claude's parents knew all about that illness. Claude's dad was Black. His mother was white. They were both active in the Civil Rights movement.

Claude Steele: They were married in the 40s, 1942. In those days, when that happened, the white person essentially was abandoned by her family and moved into the Black world/Black community. That definitely is what happened in our family. We had very minimal contact with her family. Her parents eventually came and met us, but I was old enough to remember that when that happened, when my grandparents finally came. But we never, ever saw any of her siblings or cousins, or anything on that side of the family. That was how it worked.

Shankar Vedantam: Around the family dinner table, conversations about race, how it worked, what it meant, how to deal with it were constant. For Claude's dad, who worked as a truck driver, these conversations and the anxiety that provoked them were an ever-present part of his workday.

Claude Steele: He was constantly worried that as he got older, rather than give him all of the benefits he might be due as his seniority increased, that they might try to fire him because that's what he and his friends talked about, is the constant pressure that they might plant something and put something in your coat and say you tried to steal it and then fire you just at the point when you were going to get some increase in salary or increase in benefit of some sort. That happened to Black people all time, and "You better be careful." There was a lot of conversation like that going on.

Shankar Vedantam: But even as they talked to the kids about the challenges of race, Claude's parents retained a streak of optimism. Experiences like the one at the golf course were not to be avoided, but to be sought out and confronted.

Claude Steele: The culture of the family was to resist this illness in society. Make them turn you away. That was probably a byproduct of being kind of in the movement, which a lot of the Black community was at that time. So the idea was you're a soldier of integration in a sense. You're out there not letting the world easily take opportunities away from you. I do think they shared a strong sense that the world really was ours, that we had every right to do what everybody else did, but that there was this evil in the world. There was racism. It was white supremacy in the world.

Martin Luther King, Jr.: Let us fight passionate men unrelentingly for the goals of justice and freedom.

Claude Steele: Things could be changed, and that there was a better way to live, and that the ethos of Martin Luther King is very important in that I've been reading about the beloved community. They were members of such a beloved community.

Martin Luther King, Jr.: The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community. The aftermath of non-violence is redemption.

Claude Steele: I grew up as a pretty confident kid. I didn't grow up as a kid feeling hammered into place, or subdued. I think maybe it came from this framing of things.

Shankar Vedantam: This is Hidden Brain. I'm Shankar Vedantam. Claude Steele grew up in a time when Black kids could be turned away from public pools, when an employer could openly discriminate against Black teenagers and dismiss them with a racial epithet. Despite these obstacles, Claude went off to college, graduated and decided he was going to become a psychologist. He enrolled in graduate school at Ohio State University, and it was here that the question that had been forming in his mind since that summer afternoon when he was six or seven came to the fore again, "What do they really think of us?"

Shankar Vedantam: He was one of only a couple of Black students in graduate school. There were very few people of color who could serve as role models. Claude was surrounded by smart professors and grad students. Although he projected confidence on the outside, he didn't feel it on the inside.

Claude Steele: That [was] maybe the time in my life where I felt most kind of shut down, so to speak. I didn't want to talk in class. I remember being very shy and measuring everything I said, and then worrying about what I said afterwards. That's kind of what it felt like. Like, I didn't feel un-self conscious. I felt burdened with self consciousness, just overwhelmed by it in some instances. Because graduate school is all about how smart you were, and this exciting new field we were in, social psychology. You know how graduate schools get. And I was sort Exhibit A of a group that didn't seem to belong there.

Shankar Vedantam: Let me jump in for just a second, because you said that growing up you described yourself as being quite confident despite the things that you encountered growing up in the Chicago area and the racism. The support of your parents and the community left you being quite a confident kid. So, what happened? What was the transition? Why would you not be that same confident kid when you'd enter graduate school?

Claude Steele: Yeah, I think my confidence earlier in life was due to a strong conviction that I was on the right side of history, and that my family was on the right side of history, and that I was doing the right thing. You know when you're 13 or 14, you kind of take on that mission from the family. So, it was all-encompassing. I felt righteous in it. I felt that the people that ran the golf course were racist. I felt that they were morally pathetic and misguided. I didn't admire them at all. In graduate school, it just was a very different situation. It was all about how intelligent you were. You know how your group is seen in society. They're not seen as intelligent enough to belong in an elite graduate school. You know that at the slightest instant, you could be seen in terms of that stereotype, and you might not be seen as promising. People might not want to invest in your development and into your future. And they might tolerate you out of a sense of "Well, we should," but could they really believe in you? You had the worry that that was at stake with every interaction, that if you slipped into your south side of Chicago dialect, oh boy, they would see you as not belonging here. If you didn't know things in their culture, that dry wine was better than sweet wine, boy you could be seen as not belonging. And so the field that you are in, the situation that you are in, had all these points that could light up at any minute and give you that feeling that you were going to be seen as not belonging there. So, I think that was the nature of that.

Shankar Vedantam: Isn't it interesting though, Claude, that when you're describing these two worlds, and I understand they're very different from each other, but just allow me to sort of spin this out for a second.

Claude Steele: Sure.

Shankar Vedantam: When you were 13 or 14 and you went to this golf course, you didn't have to guess that someone was being racist to you because they used the N word, they kicked you out, they basically made it very plain that their disdain for you was about race.

Claude Steele: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Shankar Vedantam: When you were in graduate school, you're not sort of hearing the same thing. People are not calling you the N word presumably. There is no overt mention or discussion about race, but it's now all subtext and you're concerned about how people are hearing you and how people might think about you. Isn't it interesting that the overt form of racism, your response to that was righteous indignation and a desire to fight. And your response to sort of the subtler form of the discrimination was in some ways to shrink.

Claude Steele: I think you're a great social psychologist. That's a really good analysis, that it is the uncertainty of whether you're being seen that way or not that causes all that pressure and that churn inside your head as to what everything means. Because you don't know what everything means... It's ambiguous. I'm talking about the graduate school situation, you just don't know. If you knew that they saw you that way, as you just pointed out, maybe you could adapt and you could have a sense of righteousness that would make it easy to put the blame on them. But in an ambiguous situation where you know that they could see you in terms of that stereotype is not promising and not so on and so on, but you don't know that they didn't in fact see you that way. Maybe they didn't. This was here I am, just watching a football game with fellow graduate students and a few faculty, and if I talked like I did growing up, what would they think of me? What would that mean? Maybe it would mean, maybe they'd be perfectly fine with it, but you don't know. And you worry that it wouldn't. You worry that they would come to see you as less promising. The stakes were always high.

Shankar Vedantam: It's fascinating because you've used the word a couple of times that it was the uncertainty of what was happening that was actually disconcerting. What's interesting is again, in contrast with the golf course experience, there's no uncertainty in the golf course experience. You know exactly where you stood with the people running the golf course, whereas with the professors at graduate school there's uncertainty. And what I'm taking

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Claude Steele: Yes, that's a good way to put it. I think it does come from the outside world, which is in the sense that you know that everybody around you knows the stereotype about your group, and that they could use it in seeing you, and how they treat you and invest in you. They could. But you don't know that that's affecting every particular interaction or situation. So, it is an inherently ambiguous situation, and that ambiguity forces a lot of churn in the internal psychological world where you're kind of trying to interpret things all the time. "What did that mean? Well, what did that mean?" "I'm too touchy here. Let's forget about this." And, "No, no, no he really is. He does not believe in you, man. You were crazy to even think that." You're kind of going back and forth as to what is the situation you're in.

Shankar Vedantam: These fears raised the stakes even during innocuous situations, like when he was hanging out with professors and his fellow students watching TV.

Claude Steele: The people in the situation were warmly inviting us over to see the football game, and just watching the football game. I felt that if anything leaked out as to Blackness, that it could lead to a negative judgment. Could I count on the fact that in the America of that time, given the life I had and the America I knew, could I just count on the fact that they'd never think that about me? When it got down to it, they just might not take me as serious. You would never be their favorite son, was the worry kind of thing. You didn't have that kind of opportunity in this situation. So, to go back to the third grade swimming pool situation, you just know how your group is seen. This is an important situation, but it could be they're just not going to see you that promising. And they never ever even have much personal awareness of it. They could downgrade you without any awareness that they were doing that. I think that happens all the time.

Shankar Vedantam: Claude graduated and became a psychology professor. Over the following 20 years, he studied the nature of alcohol addiction, but his experiences growing up and in graduate school stayed with him. He didn't yet have a conceptual framework to explain them. They just felt like personal experiences. And then, while he was at the University of Michigan, he noticed something about his students that prompted him to make a connection with his own life.

Claude Steele: African American students at the University of Michigan, who had the same SAT scores and prior grades as white students, were still getting lower grades at Michigan than other students at Michigan. I wondered, well how could that be? Here, they have the same preparation, the same skill levels as measured by traditional measures and so on. They should be performing the same, if it's just preparation and ability and so on. And yet, they're not. So, why is that? Then we found the same thing was true for women in advanced STEM courses. Same preparation. Same skills, test scores, but as the work got really difficult and challenging, sort of at the frontier of their skills, you'd see this difference in performance, women not doing quite as well as men. So there was a phenomenon there, and we were just trying to figure out what is that, what is causing that under-performance?

Shankar Vedantam: Claude and his colleagues came up with a study. The first step to a solution was to understand the problem. They wanted to see if they could generate under-performance of some students in a laboratory setting.

Claude Steele: The phenomenon kind of came out of experiments, where we would have... Let's take women in math, those were the very first experiments that we did. Women and men who were really good at math, but we would give them a really hard test, a half hour section of graduate record exam you would take, if you were a math major, not the general quantitative section of the exam. So, we knew it would cause them frustration like the advanced math courses that they were taking in college. It would be frustrating. We had the beginning idea that for women, this would be a different experience than for the men. For the men, as they experience that frustration, they'd worry "Geez, am I in the right field? Am I as good at math as I thought I was? This is really hard." They have that level of worry. But, for women, there'd be an extra worry. In addition to the worry the men have, they'd also worry, "Is it true what people say about women and their math abilities? Am I going to be seen that way, and treated that way?" So into their minds at some level, conscious, semi-conscious, unconscious, comes this additional worry which takes up some cognitive resources to entertain. And you just can't will it out of your mind. It's there. So, our sense was this was going to interfere with their performance. Even though they're just as good at math, they're going to not do as well on this difficult test. Sure enough, that's what happened.

Shankar Vedantam: It was like Claude's experience in grad school, as he worried whether his professors held negative stereotypes about him, that his Blackness leaking out would make them take him less seriously. These worries imposed a cognitive tax on his performance. He wasn't able to fully focus on the intellectual challenge of graduate school because part of his mind was distracted by the worry that his professors held stereotypes about him. Claude and his colleagues came up with a term for the phenomenon, "Stereotype Threat." This threat affected the person who was the target of the stereotype. Unwittingly, this could actually make the stereotype appear true. If women under-performed at math because of stereotype threat, someone could look at their results and say, "See? We knew it." The researchers had shown they could generate a stereotype threat in the lab in the study with men and women taking the tough math test. But to prove they were right, they also wanted to show they could turn off stereotype threat and boost the performance of the students.

Claude Steele: The logic of stereotype threat is demonstrated by showing that if you do the experiment over again, or you do different conditions of the experiment in which you somehow remove the stereotype threat from that math test, then the women should do as well as the men. They are equally skilled. They should do as well as the men without that pressure, if it's that pressure that is suppressing their performance. So we, after a long time, came up with an effective way of eliminating the stereotype threat they'd experience while taking that test. That way was

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that worry's not relevant to this test. We haven't defeated that as a stereotype, but we've made that stereotype about women's math ability irrelevant to interpreting the experience they're having on this test. So, they can discard it and just take the test with about the same level of anxiety as the men. When you do that, the women's performance shot up to match that of equally skilled men. I should probably underline "equally skilled". It doesn't mean it eliminates a gap between men and women altogether, but it eliminates this mysterious under-performance gap that happens among equally prepared men and women where they do have the same skills, but the women aren't doing as well. That gap was entirely eliminated by getting rid of the stereotype threat pressure. That was a big day for us, because we saw we had something there. And we could replicate that almost at the level of, as they used to say as a parlor trick, you could get it. So we had confidence in it.

Shankar Vedantam: Stereotype threat was like an anchor that the women were dragging behind them as they took the math test. Remove the anchor, and the women closed the gap between themselves and equally skilled men. Over time, Claude and his colleagues conducted more studies to better understand how stereotype threat could affect different groups. At Stanford University, they looked at a phenomenon in the context of race.

Claude Steele: We got white and Black Stanford students to come into the lab, and take again a half hour section, a difficult section of the graduate record exam. For half of them, we represented the exam as a measure of intellectual ability. For the other half, we represented it as just a task that was not a measure of intellectual ability. Our reasoning was, "Well if I'm taking a test that's a measure of intellectual ability, how smart I am, then that stereotype about my group is relevant. I can't ignore it in interpreting my experience of taking the test. This is a hard test. It's important to me. I'm going to be worried that as I experience frustration on it, that I'm confirming the stereotype or that I'm going to be seen to be [a] stereotype." All that extra worry takes up the cognitive resources and undermines performance. That's what happened, Black students equally skilled to white students, didn't do as well on the standardized test. In the other condition, we represented the same task, same task, it's important to point out, as a task that had nothing to do with intellectual ability. So now as I take the task and experience some frustrations on it, it's kind of fun or interesting. Frustration, like if you're solving a puzzle, is kind of interesting. And under that condition, Black students and white students adjusted for their preparation, performed the same. It was that plank of early studies that gave us some confidence that we had a phenomenon here. It gave me a sense that: This captures kind of what I experienced in graduate school, and I've experienced in various times continuously throughout my life. That, this pressure of being possibly seen through a stereotype in some important part of your life, is distracting and upsetting, and it can interfere with your functioning right there in the immediate situation. And if it continues in that situation, you might say "I don't want to spend my life in this walk of life. I want to go somewhere where I feel just more comfortable." You can imagine a white guy trying to make it in the NBA, or trying to play really elite basketball. That kid is in an intense stereotype threat situation, where any frustration he has could be seen as maybe confirming the stereotypes that whites don't have the same ability in this sport, or maybe he'd be treated like he doesn't have the same ability and he wouldn't get the same scholarship offers. Maybe he wouldn't get the same encouragement along the way, that people wouldn't invest in him as much because he's a white guy and white guys just aren't seen as having the same talent in that domain. So, that person would be under a very comparable form of stereotype threat, that a Black kid is going to be under in the academic domain. Or that a woman is going to be under in the advanced math domain. So by spelling it out as a stereotype threat, you could see that it's a general phenomenon, not just something particular to a group.

Shankar Vedantam: When we come back, the many ways that stereotype threat plays out in the world today.

Claude Steele: They see all this stuff on television and murder, after murder, after murder, after murder of them, people like them. They just have to wonder, "What do these people think of us?"

Shankar Vedantam: You're listening to Hidden Brain. I'm Shankar Vedantam.

Shankar Vedantam: This is Hidden Brain. I'm Shankar Vedantam. Psychologist Claude Steele has spent a quarter century studying the phenomenon of stereotype threat. Drawing on experiments and experiences from his own life, he started to see how the fear that people have of stereotypes about them can affect how they behave. Some people facing stereotype threat just perform worse. Others choose to drop out of their preferred fields. Some find ways to mask their identity in order to disarm the stereotypes held by others. Claude calls this "Whistling Vivaldi".

Claude Steele: That is from the autobiography of Brett Staples, who is a columnist for The New York Times now. In his autobiography is "Parallel Time," and he describes a situation very similar to mine going into psychology as a graduate student at the University of Chicago. Coming from a small town, areas on the south side, walking down the streets of Hyde Park, a big guy dressed like a student, and he could see that he made white people nervous, that people avoided eye contact and clutched their purses a little bit, walked to the other side of the street. Through these things, he could see he was being seen stereotypically, as a possibly menacing African American male in that situation. People were avoiding him. And for a variety of reasons, which he goes into interestingly in that autobiography, he was whistling, and he whistled Beatles tunes and Vivaldi. And when he walked down the streets doing that, people really responded to him differently. They relaxed. It just wasn't the same avoidance of eye contact. They clearly saw him not in terms of the stereotype of him being a possibly menacing African American male, but they probably saw him as "Oh, he's just a student at the UC," so they could relax and say, "Hey, how are you doing?"

Shankar Vedantam: To be clear, Claude is not recommending that people facing stereotypes whistle Vivaldi. It's unfair to ask people who are the target of stereotypes to compensate for the biases held against them by others. But the story reveals how many of us try to combat stereotype threat.

identity, religion, age, race, ethnicity, there are negative stereotypes. And when you're in a situation where those stereotypes could be important, if you were seen that way, they could be important to you... People tend to whistle Vivaldi, and tend to present themselves. "I fit in as an American," might be the immigrants. I don't want those things, those signs from the old country. I want to fit in as an American. I'm going to speak Americanese. I'm going to get rid of that old dialect. I'm going to get rid of those styles of dress. Especially in the second and third generation, you're going to see a lot of that. That's the phenomenon that I think is stereotype threat.

Shankar Vedantam: The more Claude looks at the world, the more examples he sees of stereotype threat. Take for example an ordinary parent/teacher conference.

Claude Steele: A parent/teacher conference in let's say grade school, and the parents are African American and they're coming to talk to the teacher about their son who's in her class, and the teacher is white. Because of the stereotypes that exist here and that have come from our history, the African American couple feels some pressure about stereotypes and they really worry that this school and this teacher is going to see their child in terms of these stereotypes, and maybe them too. And, that seeing their child in terms of these stereotypes, they're not going to see his abilities and not want to invest in him and see him as the, again, the favorite son. He doesn't have a chance to be seen that way because of the stereotypes. So, they're on edge in this conversation. They begin it on edge, [because] their job here is to deflect themselves and their son from being seen in terms of these stereotypes, and they're going to make this point because this is their opportunity to straighten the school out on this. The white teacher, for her part, she's got an equally powerful form of stereotype threat. She's thinking, "Jesus, anything I say here that I intend to be constructive criticism of this young man is going to be seen by these parents as racist. They're going to see me as a racist." So there they are on some Thursday afternoon at four o'clock with the weight of American history sitting there between them, making this a very fraught kind of conversation... The same conversation between parents and a teacher in another society would just be ordinary. Everything would be trusted, and criticism is appreciated. It'd be a very different conversation maybe between two white people or between two Black people. The conversation would be very different. But given our history of this society and the role race has played in it, and the kind of stereotypes that have evolved in our society about the groups, this is a very fraught situation.

Shankar Vedantam: Recent events have illustrated just how fraught this situation can be.

Audio Recording of Protesters Chanting: I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe.

News Clip: Former Officer Derek Chauvin is now accused of second degree murder, which carries a stiffer penalty...

News Clip: Half an hour before a city-wide curfew is supposed to go into effect, police advanced and with seemingly little warning fired tear gas and smoke canisters into the crowd.

Claude Steele: The African American community is dealing with the stereotype that anything they do is going to be seen as aggressive, and they could be shot through the window of the car. It is a terrifying form of stereotype threat. The police are dealing with stereotypes of their own, that this is an oppressive force, it's the thin blue line that protects white supremacy, and that they are inherently racist and their job is to just control this population of people, and anything they say would get them seen that way in terms of that stereotype about them. So, it becomes an extremely fraught situation, much like the parent/teacher conference. Again, its American history. The white cop in the white neighborhood is going to be much more relaxed in terms of those kinds of pressures. In a different society with a different history, if we were in the West Indies it's going to be different. But in America, given our history and the stereotypes about these groups, when you bring them together that way: Derek Chauvin and George Floyd on that silly interaction over a possibly counterfeit \$20.00 bill, is just fraught with this history shaping the interaction and attention, and the excess between them. That, I think, is we think we're all past our past, but as I guess Faulkner said, "The past isn't even past." It's with us. And these stereotype pressures are one of the ways that the past comes right into our daily lives and shapes our experiences with each other on an ongoing moment-to-moment basis. It isn't far away from any of us, really.

Shankar Vedantam: The thing that I'm hearing as you're speaking about these interactions, and it really is poignant, the description of the parent sitting before the white teacher at the parent/teacher association meeting. You almost didn't need to finish the thought experiment for us to basically see what was unfolding in that room, as you say on a Thursday afternoon at 4PM. There really is sort of poignancy to it, but there's also I think one of the things that's really interesting to me is I think there's a real compassion to this idea of stereotype threat, because it actually asks people to be compassionate not just to the African American man on the street, but also potentially to the white police officer. And I'm wondering, do you ever get pushback from that? Do people tell you, "Hang on Claude, what are you doing? You're basically giving an out to the police officer who was just about to shoot or strangle a Black man"?

Claude Steele: There are moments, the George Floyd moment for example being one, where there's just a huge moral convulsion that this is wrong, and this society has to fix it. In that moment, a moment like that, elaborating a psychological empathic characterization of the police is beside the point at best. If it's offered as some way of discouraging that moment, the political significance of the moment, it can be seen as a betrayal of the African American community. So, I don't offer it that way. I offer it as, how are we going to go forward? How is this society ever going to go forward? It's just as important in that student/teacher situation as it is in the policing situation. That's where empathy is important. We have to, I believe and maybe this goes all the way back to my youth and the tenure of the Civil Rights movement in that era, of beloved community where we were wanting to have an integrated one.

where everybody had opportunity and support. That's the effort here. That's the American experiment. It's in relation to that American experiment that I think the stereotype threat concept offers us a way of connecting to each other and trying to find a way forward so that both sides can see what they do to each other, what they mean to each other. And then they can use their experience of stereotype threat to understand the other group's experiences of stereotype threat. "Oh yeah, I see. This isn't just you Black people, or you women in math complaining about some phantom pressure. This is a pressure I felt in a different context and a different way, but it's a pressure that I felt. I see what you mean." So it gives, I hope, a language to come together and be pragmatic about going forward. In recent years, maybe months, I have stressed the need in these situations to build a context of trust that in this effort to have an integrated society, the first and most important task is to recognize the challenge to trust that our history has bequeathed to us. We try to build trust. First, train the police so that they understand the terrible circumstances of "ghetto life" in America... The poor schools, the assignment of the worst teachers, the over-disciplinary reactions that happen to Black kids in school, the intense policing and sentencing, and incarceration rates, the huge unemployment that besets those communities. The destabilization of family life that happens in those communities, the poor access to health care and to good food, and so on. If the police have some sense of what the people in those communities are dealing with, and the people in those communities begin to have some comparable sense of what the police are dealing with, then they can begin to approach each other a little more empathically. But this polarization into roles that just represent each other as opposing forces, each seeing each other as evil, is kind of where things stand at this moment in our discourse. And there are things that are accomplished in a huge upheaval of this sort that are very important. I think one of which is that I think white Americans have come to see... It's a "We believe you" moment for white Americans. They're beginning to see, "Oh, I see. There really are some things that happened to you in this society because you're Black. I see that." That's a big accomplishment of the moment. In going forward and in making our institutions work, and our organizations, our schools, we need to have a language for coming together. I think this is part of it, not all of it of course, but I think it's helpful in getting that set of parents and that teacher to be able to talk to each other and trust each other.

Shankar Vedantam: Claude Steele is a psychologist at Stanford University. Today's show is the first in a two part series about the paradoxes of knowledge. Next week, if you could hear everything that people really thought about you, would you want to find out? Or is it better to remain in the dark?

Female Voice (Future Guest): There are times where I feel as though naiveté kept me safe. There are also times where I felt as though I was extremely vulnerable as a result.

Shankar Vedantam: Hidden Brain is produced by Hidden Brain Media. Our production team includes Bridget McCarthy, Laura Kwerel, Kristin Wong, Ryan Katz, Autumn Barnes, and Andrew Chadwick. Tara Boyle is our executive producer. I'm Hidden Brain's executive editor. Special thanks this week to our former producer, Rhaina Cohen, who played an important role in building this episode. Thanks also to all our voice actors this week: Julia Drachman, Leila Sales, Vinh Trinh, Brian Shane, Scott Salley, Nancy Van Lydegraf, Jason Haas, and Bailey Lynn. Our unsung hero this week is the Society for Personality and Social Psychology. SPSP, as it's known, is an academic organization where many psychologists share their research. At a recent SPSP conference, I heard Claude Steele talk about how the weight of American history continues to shape our lives. It led to the episode you just heard. For more Hidden Brain, you can subscribe to our newsletter at [News.HiddenBrain.org](https://news.hiddenbrain.org). If you liked today's story and want to help us do more stories like this, please go to HiddenBrain.org and click on Support. I'm Shankar Vedantam, see you next week.

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